

Elder Health Tips
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Bureau of Family and Community Health
Office of Elder Health

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Take The First Step: Physical Activity and Older Adults

What reduces the risk of dying of heart disease and decreases the risk for colon cancer, diabetes and high blood pressure? What helps control weight and helps build strong bones? What relieves arthritis pain and may reduce the symptoms of depression?

The answer - physical activity.

For older people, physical activity is one of the most important keys to maintaining a good quality of life. Physical activity has been shown to help those individuals who have a chronic disease, are quite frail or are wheel-chair bound to grow stronger.

What We Know:

Research shows that:

- Middle aged and older men and women who engage in regular physical activity have higher levels of the good cholesterol (HDL) than do those who are sedentary.
- Strength training helps people maintain and improve their balance and may help reduce falls and fractures.
- New data indicates that exercise can also keep your brain healthy.

- Physical activity may help reduce depression and increase one's energy level.
- Physical activity and fitness help promote a good quality of life and a longer life.
- Conditioning and strength training exercises seem to improve older people's ability to function, particularly if they may already have more limited ability.

However, research also shows that:

- Approximately one out of 3 people age 50 and over is sedentary
- 37% of white non-Hispanic men and almost half of white non-Hispanic women age 75 and older are not physically active
- Approximately 3 out of 5 black non-Hispanic women and men 75 and older are not physically active

The American College of Sports Medicine stated "... **there is no segment of the population that can benefit more from exercise than the elderly**"

It is never too late to start a physical activity program!

Types of Physical Activity:

There are many forms of physical activity that can benefit older people. For example, **stretching** can help ease body movements and increase blood flow. Stretching muscles increases flexibility and improves balance. It is especially important to stretch the hamstring-the muscles in the back of the leg-regularly. **Caution: you should never stretch your muscles when your body is cold.** There are many excellent stretching exercises that can help older people. **Strength training** helps to build bone and muscle. Sometimes, free weights or weight machines are used to build strength but common things like soup cans may also work. **Aerobic exercise** makes the heart stronger and the body more fit. Swimming, walking and dancing are examples of low-impact aerobics. Many routine activities like housework, climbing the stairs or gardening also increase levels of physical activity.

The U.S. Surgeon General suggests that people who have not been active can improve their health by becoming moderately active on a regular basis. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines moderate as at least 30 minutes of brisk walking on most, if not all, days of the week. Some experts feel that you can break up those 30 minutes into two or three smaller segments during the day.

See the Resource Section below for ideas about where you can get help to plan the right types of physical activity for you.

Making Changes:

Starting a new activity often takes time. For example, many people go through what is sometimes known as “stages of change”. First, they may not even think about getting physically active at all. Then something makes them want to start getting involved in some sort of activity. They may want to feel more energetic, to participate in an activity with a friend, or to manage a chronic disease such as diabetes or high blood pressure more effectively.

Next, they may start looking into specific exercises or plan goals for themselves. The fourth stage involves taking action by starting an activity and continuing it. Finally, people reach the “maintenance” stage, when physical activity becomes a regular part of their lives.

Think about these “stages” and whether they might be helpful to you as you consider getting active. Also, remember that even if you get a little lazy and stop doing your exercises, you can just start over again.

If you find that you are not able to be physically active for an extended period of time, you should not give up. Things happen in everyone’s life that may make it harder to do regular physical activity. Just try to make some time when you can and then you can return to your regular activities at a later date.

Barriers:

In addition to thinking about stages of change, people often feel there are too many barriers to doing physical activity

on a regular basis. Common barriers include:

- Not having enough time
- Not liking physical activity
- Being too tired or too stressed
- Fear of falling or injury
- Needing expensive work-out clothes or equipment
- Having a disability

It helps to take a close look at the barriers and see if you can work around the problems. For example, you may be able to fit in a walk while shopping or doing other daily activities or do exercises while watching television. If you don't like traditional physical activity, think about activities like gardening, dancing or some of the heavier household chores like vacuuming that you can do.

Getting help from an exercise professional can also reduce the fear of falling. There are even special programs that help people who have a fear of falling. Local hospitals, senior centers or colleges may have such programs.

For many physical activities, you do not need special clothes—just a comfortable, pair of shoes that is appropriate for the exercise you want to do. If you do use equipment, make sure it is in good condition. Use protective gear, particularly a helmet if biking.

Planning Ahead:

It is a good idea to talk to your doctor before you start physical activity, especially if you have not been physically active. Ask about what types of physical activity would be best for you. Be sure to discuss your health status and any particular medical

problems you have as well as medications you are taking.

When planning your physical activity program, think about including some stretching, strength training and aerobic exercise, if possible. **Remember to drink lots of water and to warm-up before starting your activity and to cool down afterwards.**

Start slowly and gradually increase your activity; you can add aerobic activity at a later date. Again, talk to your doctor about what would be good for you. Also, talk about how much fluid you should have when exercising.

Perhaps you would like to join a group or go with a friend. There are also a number of tapes and books that may be helpful.

Find activities that you want to do over a long period of time.

Think about activities you can do at home or at the office. Gardening and heavier housework are just two ways of staying physically active while in your home. At work, take the stairs or take a walk at lunch. Don't look for the closest parking space. Get off the bus a few blocks away from where you want to go.

Be active in safe spaces:

If using stairs, make sure they are well-lit and not slippery

If outdoors, stay in well-lit areas where there are other people

Use sidewalks and crosswalks; don't walk in the street and cross mid-block

Set sensible goals for yourself. Don't overdo and always call your doctor if you feel sick.

Resources:

Think about what resources are available in your community to help you begin your activities. Check with your local senior center, YMCAs/YWCAs, hospital, or civic organization to find out about a program that is conveniently located.

In addition to the community resources mentioned above, the Office of Elder Health at the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, in collaboration with the Massachusetts Executive Office of Elder Affairs, the Governor's Committee on Physical Fitness and Sports, Blue Cross BlueShield of Massachusetts and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation sponsors **Keep Moving**, a program of walking clubs and regional walking events throughout Massachusetts for people ages 50 and over.

Walking is an ideal exercise for people of all ages. Walking is simple, doesn't require instruction, or need a gym or special clothing and equipment-just a comfortable pair of walking shoes. Walking is something you can do alone, with a friend or in a group. In the Keep Moving Program, you can make friends while you are getting your exercise.

The Keep Moving Program offers trained group leaders and local group facilitators. Using this structure, leaders recruit older adults, convene introductory meetings, and coordinate group walks. Walks can be held in a variety of locations, both in and out of

doors. To locate a Keep Moving Program near you, visit www.state.ma.us/dph and type in "office of elder health" in the search section. The Keep Moving Walking Club Directory is located on this web page. You may also call Jan Marble, Program Director, Keep Moving Program at **617-624-5408** for more information.

Take the First Step:

Taking that first step may seem hard, but if it means you can climb the stairs a little easier, go for a walk a little longer, lift a grandchild or gain strength if you are in a wheelchair – wouldn't it be worth it?

Suggested Materials:

AARP Webplace – This site has many articles and tip sheets on physical activity for older adults; www.aarp.org/confacts/fitness or call 1-800-424-3410

Age Page: Exercise: Feeling Fit For Life, National Institute on Aging;2002; see also, Exercise: A Guide from the National Institute on Aging, available in English or Spanish; NIA Information Center,1-800-222-2225; www.nia.nih.gov

American College of Sports Medicine; 317-637-9200; www.acsm.org

National Blueprint: Increasing Physical Activity Among Adults Age 50 and Older; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation; April, 2001

This “Elder Health TIPS” was adapted from:

“Active Living Every Day”, Blair et al., Human Genetics, 2001

“Age Page-Don’t Take It Easy-Exercise!,” NIA, 1995

“Keep Moving Walking Manual,” DPH;EOEA, 2003

“National Blueprint: Increasing Physical Activity Among Older Adults Age 50 and Over”, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2001

“Nutrition Action Health Letter”, Center for the Science in the Public Interest, v. 27 #1, Jan./Feb., 2000

“Physical Activity and Good Nutrition: Essential Elements to Prevent Chronic Diseases and Obesity”, CDC, 2002

Reuters Health, April 4, 2003 web citation of a study of the relationship of physical fitness to mental sharpness in older adults by Dr. Deborah Barnes, San Francisco VA Medical Center in Journal of the American Geriatrics Society, 51

“US Surgeon General’s Report on Physical Activity and Health”; CDC, 1996

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